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Running Head: SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS AND
MERITS OF ELEMENTARY AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS IN BURLINGTON VERMONT

**Exploring the Social, Emotional, and Educational Foundations and Merits of Elementary
Afterschool Programs in Burlington Vermont**

*Presented to the faculty of the University of Vermont Honors College and College of Education
and Social Services in partial fulfillment of the Honors College Capstone Thesis Program*

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Abstract

With the rise in family employment due to growing economic demands, afterschool programs have evolved over the last few decades to become an essential care solution for school-age children. As afterschool becomes an ever-growing need in communities, its presence as a fundamental component of a school district becomes increasingly more apparent. The Burlington School District (BSD), of Burlington Vermont, uses a system known as the Expanded Learning Opportunities, which houses an umbrella of programs designed to provide engaging and enriching extracurricular activities for the community's students. This study uses an exploratory qualitative design. To answer the following research question: *What are the ways in which Burlington School District afterschool achieves/expands on traditional programs and achieves equitable, safe, and intuitive environments?* Findings from this study suggest that BSD's priorities for its afterschool program can be categorized into four themes; (1) Quality assurance of program maintained through licensing and professional development; (2) Educational programming that provides academic support, as well as collaboration with school day faculty; (3) Prioritization of social-emotional learning models of behavior management; and (4) Implementation of a social justice-focused lens to provide equity and services to students and families. Additional findings that surfaced in this study relate to the impacts and ways covid-19 pandemic have affected BSD afterschool, and what implications can be derived from BSD's experience reformatting afterschool in the midst of the covid-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

With the rise in family employment due to growing economic demands, afterschool programs have evolved over the last few decades to become an essential care solution for school-age children. In some places, afterschool programs have even exceeded the standards of providing typical child supervision after the school day, and transcend to provide students with engaging, valuable learning opportunities.

Such is the case with Burlington School District (BSD), located in Vermont's Chittenden County. Burlington afterschool programs aim to provide high-level care, through daily programs consisting of hot lunch provided to students, as well as hour-long classes and activities structured to be engaging and educational. Staff are extensively trained throughout the year to be knowledgeable about child social and emotional development, signs of child abuse or trauma, and cultural mindfulness. Staff are also trained to be able to perform CPR/First Aid, mandated reporting duties in connection with the Vermont Department of Children and Families, and use restorative practices in program activities and student conflicts.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the research question: *what are the ways in which BSD after school program expands on the traditional basis of programs, to achieve equitable, safe, and intuitive environments?* Specifically the study will use interview data conducted with afterschool staff to investigate how Burlington School District designs and develops standards for its afterschool program at its various afterschool sites within the district. Because this study's sample will only consist of participants affiliated with the Burlington School District, this sample will be aimed at providing insight into how Burlington's schools structure their afterschool programs, to inform implementation of this district's practice for larger general populations to consider. This study uses a purposeful sample with a qualitative, exploratory research design.

Literature Review

Posner and Vandell (1994) revealed positive correlations between afterschool participation and children's ability to thrive in school socially, emotionally, and academically (Posner & Vandell, 1994). Further, there is a significant positive effect on better grades and social conduct in school for low-income children in formal afterschool programs, associating afterschool attendance. Further, participation in after school results in positive social and academic influences (Shernoff, 2010). Particularly, the quality of experiences in afterschool programs may be more significant than quantity of experiences in relation to our ability to predict positive social and academic outcomes (Shernoff, 2010). Shernoff (2010) specifically examines whether engagement and related experiential factors in after-school programs account for positive social and academic outcomes. The findings reveal the benefits of developing methodological standards and models to assess program quality and influence.

Pierce and colleagues (2010) wrote an article entitled, "Specific Features of After-School Program Quality: Associations with Children's Functioning in Middle Childhood" published in the American Journal of Community Psychology, which introduces the use of Ecological Systems Theory to view their research and study, which focuses on how the settings in which processes are learned may crucially influence child developmental outcomes. In the context of afterschool programs, this theory emphasizes the need to identify the best practices to implement into afterschool programs in regards to child learning and developmental outcomes. This article illustrated the relationship between afterschool program quality and the developmental outcomes for children who attend programs. The authors state that the main goal of their study was to specifically focus on examining associations between three afterschool program quality features that have been identified in current research: positive staff-child relationships, availability of activities, and program flexibility. Each of these quality measures were examined and tested in the study through an exploratory deductive research design, looking for causal child developmental outcomes including positive improvements in reading, math grades, work habits, and social skills with peers.

This article possesses an in-depth look at how the roles and functions of afterschool programs have developed over time to expand from only fulfilling an objective centered on child supervision for working parents, to include services targeted to low-income children and families to enrich experiences, and provide opportunities. Further, it addresses the frequency of data and previous research demonstrating how afterschool programs are being developed and expanded to improve social and academic achievement for low-income children, narrowing achievement gaps and lack of opportunity (Pierce et. al., 2010). Overall the findings in this study support the idea that afterschool programs are uniquely positioned to provide children with outlets to pursue a wide variety of activities that support their social and academic development that may otherwise not be accessible due to socioeconomic status.

This study explored many dimensions of care, activity, and implementation of methods utilized in afterschool programs. A major strength is in its utilization of standardized surveys, questionnaires, and checklists with participants and observers, establishing a credibility of information and continuity of data collection that contributes to our theoretical understanding of afterschool programs and how they may be researched to benefit children. This study's large sample, ability to conduct a long term, longitudinal study with participants, and attention to control for child and family background factors in order to objectively interpret developmental outcome data made this a strong, foundational study for future research pertaining to afterschool program development and evaluation.

A study titled "Child Care Quality: Does It Matter and Does It Need to Be Improved?" (2000) used two measures to determine child care quality, "process quality", involving "children's interactions with caregivers and other children, particular activities such as language stimulation, and health and safety measures," and the "structural characteristics" which entail the quality of the caregivers, the child:adult ratio, the size of each group of children, and the formal education and training of the caregivers (Vandell & Wolfe). This study noted a relationship wherein these measures were related and determined output of quality in child care programs, stating, "When child:adult ratios are lower, children generally appear less apathetic and distressed; caregivers spend less time in managing their classrooms and offer more stimulating, supportive care. When staff is more highly trained and better compensated, children's activities are of higher quality, and caregivers are more responsive and less restrictive." (Vandell & Wolfe). On the whole this study determined that higher quality child care settings are ultimately determined by these structural and process quality factors.

Other relevant literature to this study inherently relates to approaching concepts around behavior regulation and equity towards students of color and students who experience trauma or adverse events. The article, "The Promise of Restorative Practices to Transform Teacher-Student Relationships and Achieve Equity in School Discipline" notes how the use of restorative practices has increasingly been implemented "in an attempt to reduce reliance on suspension and eradicate the racial discipline gap" (Gregory et. al., 2016). The findings of this study in turn demonstrate some preliminary findings in this new implementation of restorative practices resulting in narrowing the racial discipline gap in school. Additionally it holds implications for equity-focused consultation in schools as a potential new framework for successful school programming.

On subjects concerning childhood adversity, the article "Adverse and benevolent childhood experiences in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Complex PTSD (CPTSD): implications for trauma-focused therapies" conveys the significance of regarding the presence of adverse childhood events (ACE's) and countering existence and relevancy of benevolent childhood experiences (BCE's), which hold potential to yield results in children relating to resilience and social emotional growth. Examples of benevolent childhood experiences include the existence of positive relationships, connections that predict the occurrence of reflecting love, predictability, and support (Merrick et. al.). This article asserts that positive experiences in

childhood may play significant roles in promoting later adaptation, shaping experiences, relationships, and behavior across development. The context of the information presented in this study may hold the potential to spur efforts to better understand the role that resources like child care centers and afterschool programs may play in garnering benevolent childhood experiences, and how these programs can use BCE's as a tool to foster solutions to mitigate the negative effects of adverse childhood experiences.

On the whole, all of these articles present similar findings related to the impact of afterschool programs demonstrating the positive influences on youth social and academic development, especially with children from minority and low-income groups. Every article was also transparent about its limitations, as well as the fact that these theoretical causal relationships between afterschool programs and child development, and that there has been past evidence of studies on this relationship yielding negative and or null results from findings of studies conducted in the past. These studies offer a holistic perspective of the variety of perspectives and dimensions from which afterschool programs can be studied to be evaluated and examine their strengths and weaknesses in promoting positive child development. These studies capture how interest has grown in regards to afterschool programs being used as an instrument to combat socioeconomic achievement gaps and promote positive child social and academic development.

Methodology

I Researcher Positionality Statement

As a student studying social work at the University of Vermont, this topic is relevant to me because it aims to explore childcare as a public welfare program, how afterschool childcare is an important asset for schools and families, and how Burlington school districts develop the standards for their program. My goal as a social work student moving forward is to focus towards working in education spaces and advocating for the needs of children and families.

Burlington School District is also a relevant subject of interest to me personally because I have worked as an afterschool staff member at The Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes Elementary for the past two years. At this K-5 elementary school, located in the city's Old North End, I've worked with over 100 K-5 students enrolled in the program.

- I have insights and previous working relationships with faculty who were invited to participate in this study
- There is potential for bias because I am a former staff and therefore not necessarily an impartial party

II Human Subjects IRB Process

Per requirements of the University of Vermont's Honors College, this study was required to be submitted to the University of Vermont's Institutional Review Board to be approved to conduct due to this study involving human subject participants. The study was submitted to University of Vermont's IRB on September 9th, 2020, and after review was approved to commence on October 29th, 2020.

Finalized documents for this study included a written consent form and information sheet for participant recruitment, a Consent Process document, a recruitment email script, and a Research Data Management and Security Plan. Upon review, the University of Vermont Research Protections Office deemed this study exempted from IRB review. This was because the study fell under University of Vermont's Exemption Category: (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation, which is deemed "low risk" human subjects research. This category describes research that "only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording)". University of Vermont's Research Protections Office asserts that the information gathered for this study "would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, be damaging to the subject's financial standing, employability, educational advancement or reputation", therefore qualifying this study for IRB exemption.

III Participant Recruitment and Sampling

Participants for this study were sampled from Burlington School Districts' elementary afterschool programs, located at the following sites and schools across the district; Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes Elementary School, Champlain Elementary School, J.J. Flynn Elementary School, C.P. Smith Elementary School, and Edmunds Elementary School. This study was designed to recruit participants who either held site director or assistant site director positions at their afterschool program, as site and assistant site directors hold a central, long term role to program wherein they are responsible for overseeing the overall program, supervising staff, working alongside school day faculty and working directly with children and families, therefore making site directors and assistant site directors the ideal candidates to give testimony on the foundations and priorities of their program.

Participants were identified through Burlington School District's online staff directory, where school district-associated email addresses were publicly available. Participants were cold-emailed by the principal investigator directly with instructions to reply to the email if interested in participating, and to fill out a google form survey to sign up for a date and time for their interview to take place. The recruitment email sent to potential participants used the University of Vermont's IRB-approved email script, and also had the participant information sheet and

consent form attached as pdf documents for participants to access. All communication around scheduling interviews took place over email individually with the principal investigator.

A sample of a potential 10 site directors and assistant site directors were emailed from the 5 afterschool program sites. Out of the sample 10, 4 participants responded and took part in the study. Participants self-identified as both lead site directors and assistant site directors from 4 of the 5 program sites. Participants all self-identified as white and BIPOC cisgender females. Participants ranged in age from being late twenties to mid forties in age.

With respect to participant confidentiality, all participants' information was de-identified and participants were each assigned a random code number. Participants' names, contact information, and all other identifying information was given distinct numerical codes to distinguish participants from one another without revealing identifying information.

IV Design and Measurement

In order to effectively collect qualitative, exploratory data to answer the research question, a longitudinal case study strategy was implemented, wherein testimony data was collected at one point in time via interview and interpreted and revisited multiple times for analysis throughout the study. Based on relevant literature and previous relevant studies, a case study strategy proves to be an effective method to analyze afterschool structural designs and subsequent child social outcomes within a real-life context. Data was gathered through qualitative interviews, which lasted for a duration of between 45 minutes to 1 hour in length. Within this exploratory case study design, variables relating to level of influence Burlington School District's afterschool programs hold to children's social, emotional, and academic outcomes.

a. Interview guide

An interview guide was designed with the intent to have participants' data collect testimony not only about the foundational history of the Burlington afterschool programs development, but also of the personal experiences participants hold within their individual relationships to their program. The interview guide contained some of the following questions:

- Can you describe what your role is in the program as a site/assistant site director? What are the responsibilities and tasks of a site director?
- What is BSD's expanding learning opportunities (ELO)? How was this program concept developed? How long has it been running?
- What are the priorities of BSD ELO beyond safety, supervision, and childcare? How is that priority held accountable by staff/system?

- Is the BSD ELO program tailored to addressing/supporting food insecurity/poverty/lack of opportunity?
- Does afterschool use particular behavioral/learning models?
- What is the level of communication between afterschool, school day teachers, and behavioral administration (school psychologists, counselors, etc) about a child's behavior or particular challenges?
- How are staff training seminars from Vermont DCF selected and why certain trainings are selected?
- From what you have seen, does the BSD ELO close the "achievement gap"?
- How does afterschool create safe and intuitive environments for students?

This interview guide was used with all participants as a baseline for gathering data pertaining to the research question. Information was also gathered organically in each individual interview based on specific information, testimony, and anecdotes that each participant provided based on their knowledge and experience within their program.

b. Remote Communication Platform

In an effort to maintain safety and convenience for participants, and adhere to CDC and Vermont state guidelines in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews moved from being administered in person to instead taking place remotely. Per University of Vermont's IRB and Research Protections Office's guidelines, interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams, as the University of Vermont supports Microsoft Teams institution-wide and considers this to be the primary preferred video conferencing platform. For the duration of interviews, cameras for both the participant and principal investigator were left on in order to retain affect and body language communication while conducting the interview, and additionally so that participants would be able to see when audio recording started and stopped during the interview process. Post-interview, participants were invited to fill out an additional, optional google form if they wanted to provide feedback on their experience as a participant.

c. Data Collection Tools (smartphone, GMR)

Audio data was recorded on a password-protected smartphone device using an audio recording application known as Voice Memos. Once all interviews had taken place and were recorded, audio data was exported and transcribed from audio to written text using GMR Human Transcription Services. For the transcription process, it was decided that audio data would be transcribed verbatim, a method that records and transcribes every part of an interview, including

all parts of dialogue and pauses so that the data would be as raw and original as possible to fully retain participant responses and leave potential for analysis around pauses and word phrasing.

V Analysis

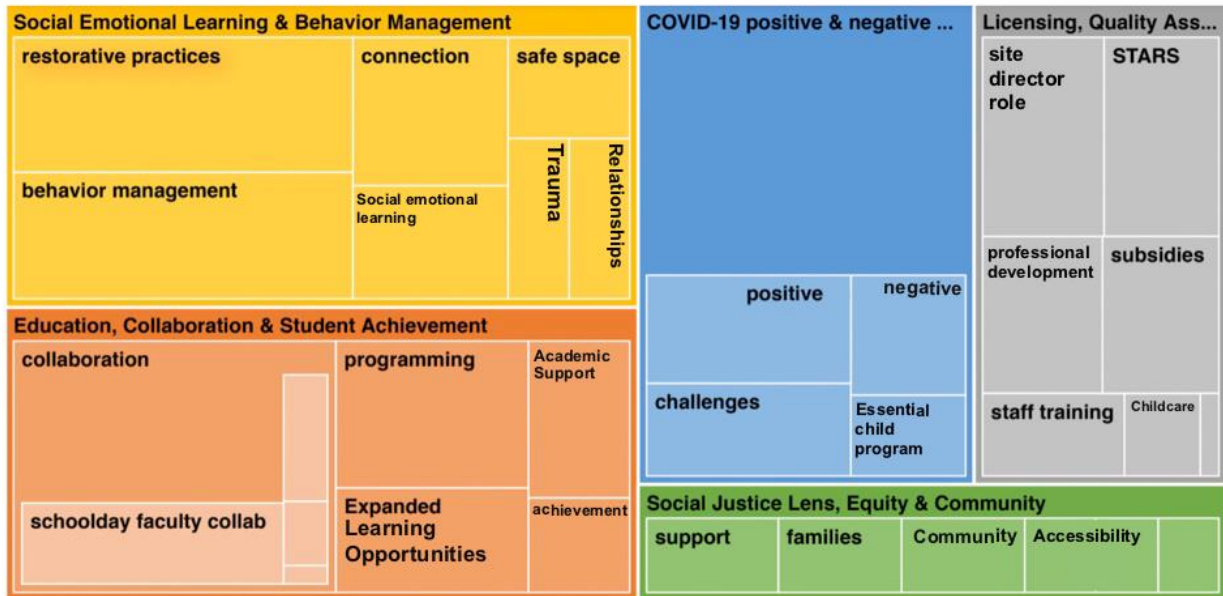
For data analysis, an inductive, grounded approach was taken to organize and sort data into relevant themes. Analysis procedure began with taking all text transcriptions from participant interviews and uploading to a qualitative data analysis software known as Nvivo. To begin building a codebook for data, word frequency queries were run to find key terms and their associated frequency of references across all 4 interviews. From there, interviews were individually line-coded for additional keywords and themes. Once a codebook was assembled from word frequency queries and line coding, the 34 codes that emerged from data were sorted into themes based on hierarchy chart query results, as well as relationships noted in overlaps of certain codes (see table 1 below). To construct visuals of data and further consolidate themes, framework analysis queries were run to compile and summarize data sorted by its associated theme and interview origin. Node matrix charts were created to display frequency of codes and key terms separated by interview.

VI Limitations

Main limitations for this study included that it had a small sample size of only 4 participants and only participants from the Burlington school district afterschool faculty population were invited to participate in the recruitment phase— meaning that this study’s findings are not necessarily generalizable to larger populations. The data is also limited within the district since participants were only recruited from elementary afterschool programs, when Burlington’s Expanded Learning Opportunity also includes middle, high school, and summer programs. Data collection also produces finite results, since only one-time interviews were utilized, and of the four participants none chose to fill out the post-interview survey form to provide feedback.

Findings

Table 1



Findings presented will focus on the four themes that emerged related to the research question “What are the ways in which BSD afterschool achieves/expands on traditional programs and achieves equitable, safe, and intuitive environments?”

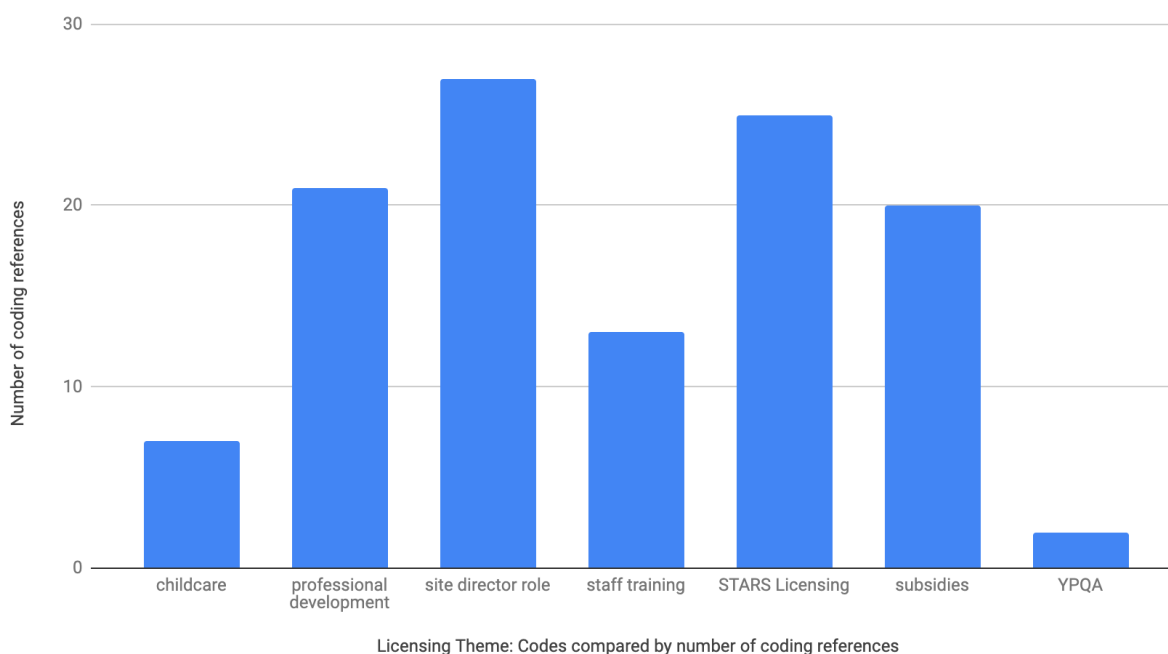
- (1) Quality Assurance and Professional Development through Program Licensure
- (2) Educational Support through Academic Programming and Collaboration with School-day Faculty
- (3) Social and Emotional Learning Prioritization through Restorative Practices
- (4) Social Justice Implementation through Equity, Community, and Intersectionality
- (5) Challenges, Positives, and Pragmatic Approaches to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Ultimately these themes from participants can inform what factors and applications are significant predictors of quality in child care for afterschool programs, and can provide answers to the research question.

Theme 1: Quality Assurance and Professional Development through Program Licensure

Table 2

Licensing Theme: Codes compared by number of coding references



Participants noted that program licensure is helpful in achieving an equitable environment because it participates in the STARS program. STARS, standing for Step Ahead Recognition System, is Vermont’s quality recognition system for child care, preschool, and afterschool programs. Vermont STARS is a quality standard program that works with parents and faculty to inform confident decisions about child care.” The primary licensing tool that BSD afterschool uses as a childcare program in the state of Vermont is the STARS License Program. According to DCF, child care programs that choose to participate in STARS are “stepping ahead— going above and beyond state regulations to provide professional services that meet the needs of children and families.” (Vermont Department for Children and Families, 2021). Table 2 displays what each number of stars represents in terms of the ranking and quality of a child care program:

Table 3

The Meaning of Each S.T.A.R. (Step Ahead Recognition System)

1 Star programs (regulation baseline, 0 points)	programs that have a full license based on the appropriate child care licensing regulations.
2 Stars programs (1-4 points)	are making a commitment to strengthen their practices. They may have made some progress in many areas or more progress in one or two areas.
3 Stars programs (5-8 points)	have made improvements and are working to reach specific goals. They have either made substantial progress in two or three areas or have made some improvements across all four areas.
4 Stars programs (9-11 points)	are established programs that have met several standards of quality in all four areas. Many four-star programs are also nationally accredited.
5 Stars programs (12-14 points)	are outstanding in all four areas (Staff qualifications and training (1); interaction with and overall support of children, families, and communities (2); How thoroughly providers assess what they do and plan for improvements (3); and The strength of the program's operating policies and business practices (4)). Many five-star programs are also nationally accredited.

(Vermont Department for Children and Families, 2021)

STARS' operates with a tiered system— wherein programs can apply for STARS recognition in the following four categories: Staff qualifications and training; interaction with and overall support of children, families, and communities; How thoroughly providers assess what they do and plan for improvements; and The strength of the program's operating policies and business practices (Vermont Department for Children and Families, 2021). Whichever categories a program applies to be recognized for are then ranked on a 1-5 "star" scale. Upon hiring employees within STARS systems, new staff are required to complete CPR and First Aid AED certifications, the Vermont DCF Mandated Reporting training, as well as complete a fingerprint-supported criminal record check (CRC). In addition, participants noted that per STARS regulations, all staff are required to participate in 11 hours of professional development training per year. Staff trainings for BSD afterschool cover an extensive amount of ground on child safety, cultural mindfulness, social and emotional learning, as well as learning and understanding signs of child physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. All training for staff are held and run by Vermont DCF representatives.

In tandem with quality assurance regulations set by STARS and Vermont DCF, another relevant topic that aligns with this theme and relates to fostering a safe environment for students includes BSD's priorities pertaining to professional development and implementation of training to attain capable and proficient staff in BSD's afterschool. Participants in the study included the following key testimony about implementation and effectiveness of the professional development opportunities encouraged by the STARS program.

One participant spoke about how having a structured licensing program encourages staff participation in their own development as professionals, by sharing, "Part of earning your STARS is following the Vermont licensing regulations and really empowering staff to proceed professional development, and engaging with students and families with quality programming". Similarly, another participant noted, "These systems are in place, really, to just make sure that we're always running the best program possible for the students, and they kind of make sure that we're adhering to guidelines." While one staff talked about the availability and access to training through the year, "Under our license, I believe all staff are required to have 11 hours every year, and we provide, um, more than those 11 hours throughout the school year."

As an added measure of professional development and self-evaluation, participants included that staff are required to routinely complete Individual Professional Development Plans (IPDPs), which provide an added measure of accountability and ensure that the professional development matches the needs and goals of the individual staff member. Participants provided key insights on the importance and implementation of professional development as a concept at BSD afterschool. For example one participant noted, "In the past years, we've really focused on restorative practices and social-emotional learning. And this year, they're [administration] taking

it even further and going and looking at racial inequalities within Vermont and the Vermont school districts... I think [these training sessions] align with our program goals and the district mission and goals as well.” While one other participant identified similar trainings when they stated, “In staff trainings, whether it be restorative practices – we did a big push last year and a little bit the year before on social-emotional learning and just making sure everyone was on the same page of understanding socially and emotionally where kids should be at based on their age. And then, that really underscored how even though they’re supposed to be there, depending on their ACE scores, depending on their trauma background, they might be lower or higher”

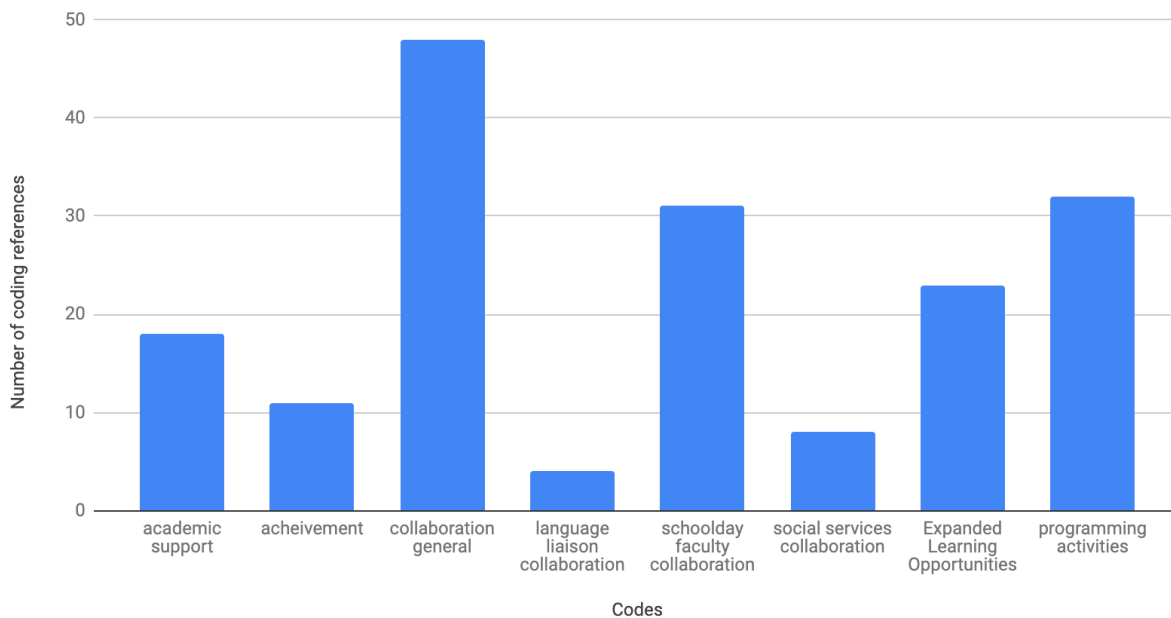
In addition to identifying ways in which the licensure program supports staff development, participants also spoke to how they support overall health and well being of the children and families the programs serve. For example one person shared, “Kids in our school get if they need it dental. They get food, they get three meals a day and snacks, they get an education, they get socialization, they get all of these wrap-around supports”

In sum, licensing and professional development are crucial to creating strong quality foundations of an afterschool program. Having a program and its associated staff with the proper qualifications is a highly important component of a child care program. This is best achieved through acquiring approval for licensing. National accreditation guarantees accountability measures for quality assurance, as well as subsidies that both make programs accessible for families and strengthen the caliber of programs for staff to build on and implement.

Theme 2: Educational Support through Academic Programming and Collaboration with School-day Faculty

Table 4

Number of Coding References for "Educational Support through Academic Programming and Collaboration with School-day Faculty"



Revisiting the BSD Expanded Learning Opportunity (ELO) program, the mission statement of ELO as a program is to “foster the social and academic success of Burlington youth through high quality afterschool and summer programming in an environment that creates lasting connections with peers, adults and the community” (Burlington School District, n.d.). BSD coins the term Expanded Learning Opportunity to encompass its afterschool programs to further emphasize how the aim of BSD afterschool is to provide a multifaceted learning approach and engaging experience for students and the greater school district community.

In interviews, a participant described what the Expanded Learning Opportunity design looks like in execution by stating: “The [Expanded Learning Opportunity], it's really to provide a safe welcoming space for students to go after the school day ends to offer routine activities, to provide experiences, regulating social and emotional, and then just connecting with families as well. I feel like one of the most exciting things is we get to meet and connect with families every day in a way that the school day doesn't. There's a really good sense of community within the after-school program, families and staff.”

Another uniting point provided by several participants involved that the overarching aim of ELO being that afterschool serves as an extension of the school day in its intent to be education, but with an emphasis on exploration and learning being tailored to students' interests. One participant noted that part of the effort to make ELO a high-quality program for students

involves efforts towards being “geared towards looking at afterschool not so much as labeled with the stigma it had before which was solely childcare, and you kinda just left your kid there and hope they didn’t fuss too much. Now what we really try and focus on is using that time constructively and bringing kids opportunities that they might not have had a chance to experience during the school day, or they might not have a chance to experience outside the school day.”

Based on participant responses, the general testament to Expanded Learning encapsulates ideas surrounding creating a welcoming space for students that offers the consistency and security of a routine, engaging activities, and social connections with their peers and with staff. Expanded Learning looks at afterschool programming as being a space where activities and programming promote experiential learning and increased academic support available for students when needed.

Classes and activities range from skill building with art, music, sports, science, cultural appreciation, and community projects. In addition, programs hold time for academic support and homework help when needed by individual students. One participant in the study provided the following example experience of a program that was run at their site in the past:

“We put together a Student Planning Council for our fourth and fifth graders last year. It was an application process. Kids had to really think about why they wanted to be on the Student Planning Council. And the council met every week for about 30 minutes. Um, and they would talk about all things afterschool. And the big picture was, we would have these kids on this planning council, and they would help make decisions around afterschool. So, they would help decide, you know, what kind of sports equipment we would get for recess. They would help decide what kind of clubs we would offer. We were going to have one or two of them come in for staff interviews during the school day and, like, pull them in and just really, really give them some voice. I think it’s really important to have engaging activities, like engaging enrichment that’s, um, built on their interests. Um, or even takes, kind of, little hints of things that they’re interested in and building on it even further without them knowing that that would be something they’d be interested in. Giving them opportunities to explore something they may not have explored otherwise”

Another key piece of this theme involves how BSD afterschool prioritizes closing achievement gaps and helping students thrive through academic support implemented into programmed activities. Two key examples participants provided involved that making afterschool engaging for students has a positive effect on school day attendance rates. As one participant remarks on this subject, “There’s been kids who struggle with attendance. And then, they are coming to school because Afterschool is there. If they have a good relationship with that staff in Afterschool, our whole goal is not to get them to do academic work, but is instead just seeing them as a whole person.”

The second example involves a participant in this study who worked to implement a weekly reading buddies program during the meal period during afterschool to encourage students to build relationships with their peers and improve their reading level during afterschool hours. The participant provided the following key testimony and details on said experience:

“I think that the Reading Buddies program that I had running for three years and really vamped up in year two and three, was helping to close that literacy gap. Maybe not a ton, but we worked really hard to push that literacy as much as we could. One big push that I had for three years, and this year being the fourth, and it is not what anyone wants or has expected, um, this COVID year, but I did a big push with the school librarian, and she and I started Reading Buddies. And we got it from one kid to 10 kids, and by the end of the third year, every single student was reading at their supertime every day for those 20 minutes. I started tracking it before we got shut down in March, and we just saw this progressive increase of kids. And I know that when we first started it with our one kiddo, those 20 minutes every single day, the anxiety around not being on the right level decreased because she ended up really getting that one-on-one attention and increasing her [reading] level.”

Additionally, this participant went on to say the following about the academic and student support-related collaborations afterschool staff engages in with other school day staff:

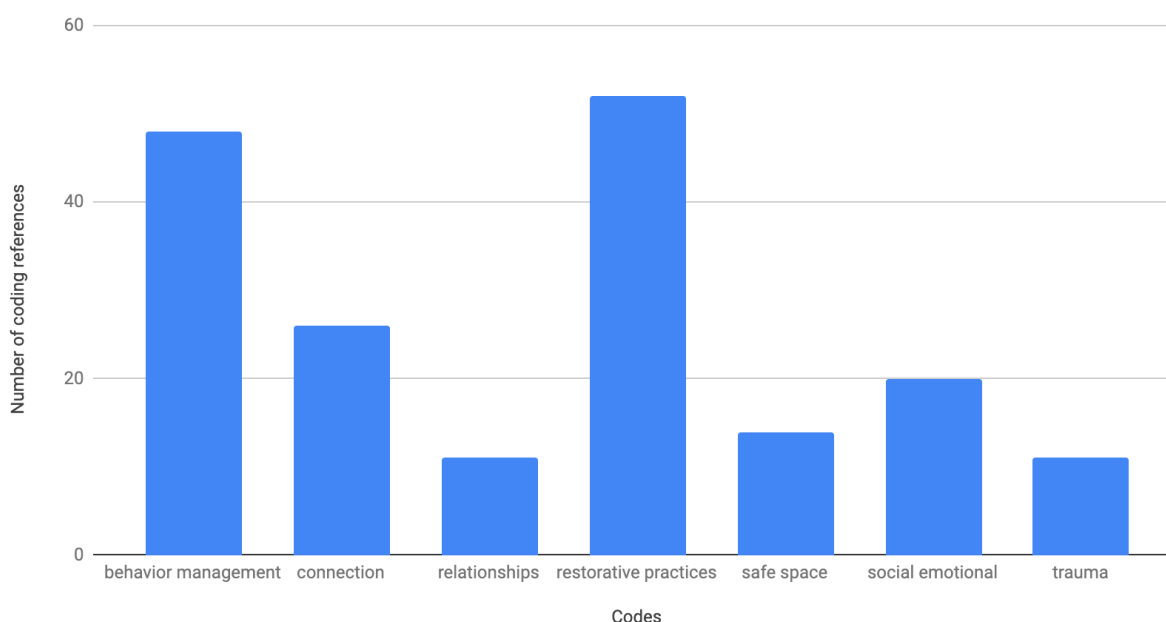
“That was one school day collaboration. And now with our academic period, we do have parents who are like, “Oh, my child is – I think my child is falling behind in math.” And so, we go and we speak with their teacher and see how we can support that particular student. We’re constantly in contact with the principal just about any issues or concerns. We are constantly in contact with the school counselors, guidance counselors, and student support services just to ensure that any issues we see are on their radar.”

A significant finding that existed across all participant interviews spoke to the fact that a key distinction about BSD afterschool is that there is a priority to see afterschool as an extension of the school day and as a means of additional guidance, support, and education for students. A participant described that much of their role as an afterschool site director involves collaboration with other school day faculty, stating: “Oftentimes, I have a meeting with the guidance counselor, or I meet with the teacher, or we’ll exchange some emails to help support each other, having referrals sometimes based on that. If there’s an incident, I would write up this incident report and make sure that everyone is looped in.”

Theme 3: Social and Emotional Learning Prioritization through Restorative Practices

Table 5

Number of coding references for "Social and Emotional Learning Prioritization through Restorative Practices"



Social Emotional learning in BSD afterschool takes the form of positive behavior management between staff and students, teaching self-regulation skills to students, and creating a safe environment for students to be heard.

Social emotional learning plays a critical role in afterschool behavior management, as staff are mitigating student behaviors that may stem from behavior modeled at home, food insecurity, trauma, challenges associated with low SES and family dynamic changes among other unique, circumstantial factors and challenges students may face. A participant in the study expands on this point, saying: “external factors in people’s lives that we’re not exposed to, whether it was a bad morning because a parent was stressed and late for – late for work and so they had a rough morning, or they had a fight with their sibling, or – you know, there are so many factors that contribute to big behaviors in a day”. In addition, another participant comments on how Restorative Practices help staff understand students displaying big behaviors, saying, “Often, the kids that are showing extreme behaviors that would resolve in their suspension or expulsion are kids that need to be in programs most often. Kids that might not

know how to get along or might not have the skills to communicate with friends or classmates. [Our goal is] keeping them in the program, finding supports and ways to support them, and making sure that they feel safe and, and comfortable as well as their classmates.”

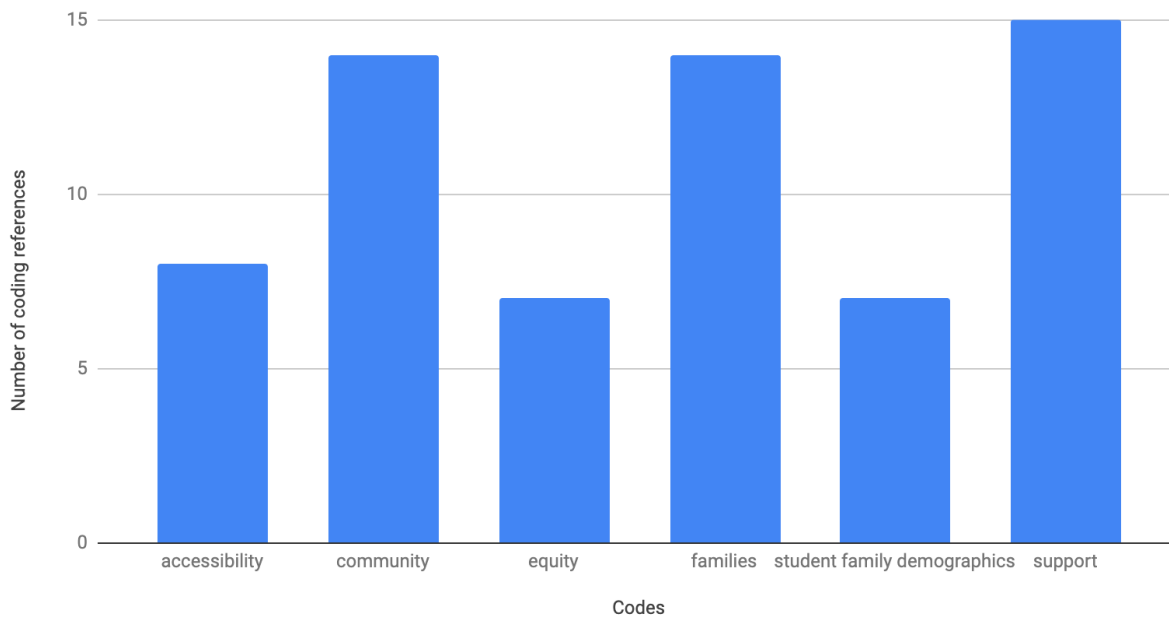
Social Emotional Learning comes into play through the form of Restorative Practices (RP). BSD afterschool implements Restorative Practices not only as a tool to mitigate and work with students on their behaviors, but also as a tool to teach self-regulation skills to students. On the topic of self-regulation, one participant remarks: “I think that the restorative practices model is so great. The whole focus is keeping kids in the program and really working through, you know, what is the root of behaviors as opposed to expulsion and suspension where, you know, [with that] you're not really figuring out what the root of the behavior is or are or why things happened the way they did and, you know, focusing on the person that was harmed”. Based on this response it can be observed that Restorative Practices teach students skills to self-regulate, approach and work through conflict, learn empathy and how to communicate and work together with peers and faculty.

Finally, restorative practices reaffirm afterschool as a safe space for students, where they are given a voice and the opportunity to be heard. One participant illustrates this concept by noting that engaging with students through restorative practices “takes the pressure off of whomever they’re having a conflict with. It allows me to mediate and have a larger vision of what – what’s going on, and it allows both kids to understand” and that it entails “really just allowing every single person to feel like they have an opportunity to speak about how they feel and know that those who they are speaking to are going to be listening and not interrupting. And for kids, that’s super important because kids are – you know, they – I feel like sometimes they get anxious when they have to explain something because they feel like they’re gonna get cut off”.

Theme 4: Social Justice Implementation through Equity, Community, and Intersectionality

Table 6

Number of coding references vs. codes for Social Justice Implementation through Equity, Community, and Intersectionality



Another theme that surfaced from the findings of this study that operated in tandem with the implementation of social-emotional learning, involves triaging a social justice lens into BSD afterschool through equity models, an emphasis on community engagement, and upholding intersectionality as a value in the program.

In addition to Restorative Practices (RP) being implemented as a tool to build social emotional skills with students, it is also utilized at the administrative level in the school district and in afterschool as a guiding equity tool for staff to mitigate student behaviors and incidents. One participant explains how restorative practices are able to come through and be utilized to provide restorative justice to students, stating: “really what it [restorative practices] is in essence is allowing people to sit and be heard, and to actively listen to how others around them are feeling ... This year, they're taking it [restorative practices] even further and going and looking at racial inequalities within Vermont and the Vermont school districts. So, those are some that we have offered to staff or our Site Director Teams have participated to bring some of that

information back that really, I think, align with our program goals and the district mission and goals as well.”

Expanding on this concept brought up by this participant, BSD applies restorative justice as a behavior management strategy in order to work with students proactively on behaviors. This approach is also intentional with its additional purpose aimed at decreasing unnecessary disciplinary actions— namely the unjust practice of using suspensions predominantly against students of color. A participant remarked the following on how the format of an RP-guided conversation benefits students: “those conversations to really hear where another person is coming from, and another person’s thought process, and to – to acknowledge that that was their thought process, and to acknowledge the hurt, and for both of those kids to figure out a way to move forward in a positive direction. I think, you know, that type of conversation in itself can teach a form of social justice.”

In this way, the prioritization of RP and social emotional skill building helps students hold conversations about social justice, as well as engage in social justice in a way that allows students to exercise empathy and understanding for one another. This application of RP also allows students to take an active approach in learning how to see the world and experiences from a point of view outside of their own, which is a fundamental piece of engaging in social justice on an individual level for students, and on an administrative/macro level as the school district implements these priorities and practices.

Another key piece that encompasses this theme stemmed from participants reflecting on BSD’s focus on building community within the program and greater school district, as well as working to build a space that celebrates diversity and intersectional backgrounds of students and families. Speaking to Burlington’s level of diversity, a participant stated “I believe Burlington has the highest percentage of refugees and immigrants getting resettled in Burlington, and in particular in the neighborhood of the school that I work at. We have kids and families who are coming from possibly traumatic backgrounds just based on however they ended up in Vermont. They have this different perspective of the world and of self, and I think that could possibly add to stressors.”

In terms of connection with families, participants made two salient remarks on the subject. When recounting their role and duties as a site director, one participant noted: “[part of my role is] just connecting with families as well. I feel like one of our biggest— one of the most exciting things is we get to meet and connect with families every day that the school day doesn’t. So, there’s a really good sense of community within the after-school program, families and staff.” Another participant remark included the following on the topic of community: “This probably goes for all programs across the district, we’re really working on building a community of students and families and that social, emotional piece— really helping kids navigate, play together, and interacting in positive ways.”

Connection and building community with families takes many forms at afterschool. Site directors’ primary role is to be in communication with families, checking in with parents at pick-up time, and coordinating families signing up for spots in the afterschool roster as well as

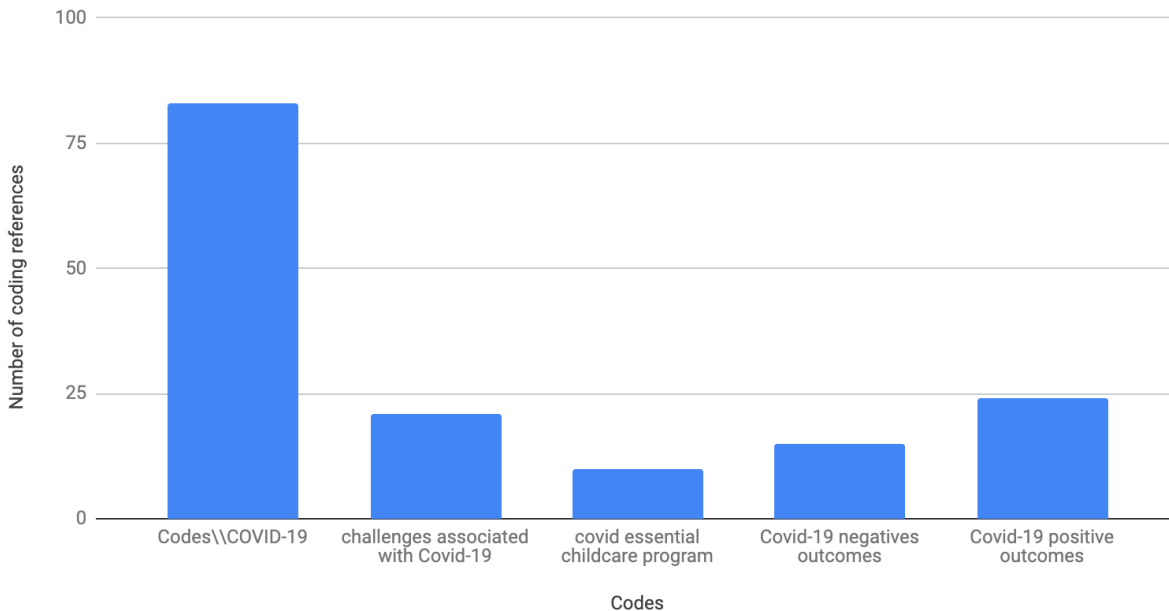
activities that each individual student wants to do. In addition, each program location will hold monthly community dinners, where the school district provides a free meal and families are welcome to bring in additional meals from traditional backgrounds.

Participants also presented information regarding social justice policy that is relevant and implemented within the afterschool system of Burlington School District. Specific policy that one participant cited during their interview included the McKinney Vento Act of 1987, which BSD afterschool will follow and refer to in emergency situations with students experiencing homelessness. A participant expanded on their experiences referencing McKinney-Vento, stating: “[McKinney Vento] is the strongest example of policy to help a homeless student. They [students] have certain rights if they’re homeless. And students who are homeless are – have a priority spot at Afterschool. I try to encourage them that there’s a family outreach coordinator who could help walk them through the subsidy process.”

Challenges, Positives, and Pragmatic Approaches to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 7

Number of coding references vs. Codes for Challenges, Positives, and Pragmatic Approaches to the COVID-19 Pandemic



The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically restructured the landscape of child care modality and accessibility for both the child care organizations in question and the families that rely upon them for care and supervision of their children. During the interview process of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic was brought up in discussion by participants organically and without prompting numerous times throughout all participant interviews. During analysis after data collection, it was found that there was an aggregate total of 83 references made to COVID-19 across all interviews (see table 6). Overall findings regarding developments in program as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic involved participants recounting ways that the afterschool program had to be restructured to accommodate social distancing regulations, and how these changes yielded both challenges and benefits for faculty and students.

Participants recanted that challenges associated with adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic arose in several areas. For one, types of activities and classes in program for students were limited in order to comply with social distancing guidelines. Participants remarked that activities were scaled back because “we can’t have community vendor partners come in. And we can’t go [on field trips]” and “staff are having to really, really think about activities, and that has been, I think, a challenge for staff. but we just can’t share the supplies like we used to.”

Participants shared in their responses that there were also difficulties surrounding budgeting and material sharing, as students would not be able to share materials for activities, many porous and cloth materials needed to be removed or substituted from each program site’s supply offices in order to be “covid-friendly” and easy to disinfect.

Opportunities for socialization among students also had to drastically change due to COVID-19. One participant’s response focused on this aspect saying, “the kids aren’t able to see other kids from other grades, which is a bummer. Our snack and play period is gone. We don’t have the big meal. I think I missed that the most. Because that was when I got to see all the kids, and interact, and check-in. And it was just very fun, and lively, I gave announcements, and we did special surprises. So, snack and play is done, we don’t do that anymore.”

In addition, another participant added to the socialization piece, saying that while social distancing is maintained and enforced, it is difficult to rationalize these rules to younger students, who are inclined to want to engage in hands-on play, why they need to stay social-distanced from their peers. A participant spoke to this piece, saying, “we have these big expectations, especially in COVID where you can’t touch your friends, and you can’t play with your friends’ hair, and you can’t have your mask off. [For] a lot of our kindergarteners, this is weird. [The] COVID world is their first introduction to school, to formalized schooling, which is definitely weird. Then, you know, they’re coming off of a summer break and an entire COVID break [starting in March 2020]. I don’t know if we can call it that, but those 13 weeks or so of lockdown, and then summer, and then they’re back in a very structured environment, it’s a lot for them to go through.”

In interviews, participants were asked to share what successes they felt BSD afterschool was yielding in spite of the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were

asked questions such as: ‘what positives were yielded that have benefited students in ways that were unanticipated?’ One key finding participants provided in this area pertained to the fact that activities being restructured left additional time in programming that was targeted towards more direct and focused academic support for students, as a participant remarks, “Now what we really try and focus on is using that time constructively and bringing kids opportunities that they might not have had. There was this space to do the academic support. So, there was this request. Like, we’ve been wanting to do academic support for years. We’ve just never been able to build it in because we were doing these big supper transitions.”

Another beneficial outcome that participants noted involved smaller groups creating close social bonds and positive connections among students and afterschool staff. A participant stated: “I think some of our staff have really taken advantage of the fact that they’re gonna be with the same set of kids every day, and they have kind of helped bond that class in a way that might not have happened previously.” Additionally, a participant went into detail on the small group system used in program, saying: “Kids as grade level bands is, I mean, it’s not what we want, but it’s also nice, because they know each other. They’re really comfortable with the kids in their group. This year, especially, because kids are kind of with their classes or with their ‘pods’, um, I think it has truly become an expansion of the school day.”

BSD afterschool has also been able to consistently continue to supply food subsidies so students are getting meals during the afterschool time. On this topic, a participant also noted that food services associated with the school district are providing afterschool meal kits to send students home with, saying, “We’ve been getting food boxes on Fridays, occasionally. So, that means that we get a delivery from Food Services. It’s just like a prepped meal kit, basically, and it’s like four or five meals with fresh produce and stuff, and it’s really great. Especially with the pandemic, which I think has really brought to light a lot of these food insecurity issues, especially.”

Additionally, participants provided insights and testimony about BSD’s Essential Childcare Program, which was instituted during the upswing of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 following school closures across Vermont. When asked about the development of this program, a participant who worked directly as a staff member of the essential child care program provided the following testimony:

“That program [essential childcare program] was a very different beast than afterschool, because you were with the same kids or kid for the whole day. So, it was open to children of essential workers, and it was 8:00 to 4:00, every day, and normally you were with one or two kids, and it was kind of structured like one staff member or two staff members would be assigned to a specific family. and they were with that family for the day, basically. It was staffed by after-school staff and school day paras. And each staff was assigned to one household. So, if a household had two kids, it would be one staff and two kids, or if a household had one child, it would be a staff member and that one child. So, whatever days those students came to school or came to the program, they were

with that one staff member. And you were with them the whole day. And it was sort of structured... Not really like a 'school day' school day, because there was a lot less academics. But it was more like, oftentimes, the kids I worked with would often have reading assignments online or they'd have to meet with their class, over Zoom, and it was very cool to see, in some ways, but in other ways, it brought everything to... It was such a different reality. It's like it's a very different scope of childcare than I think the way afterschool runs. In terms of Burlington, the essential childcare is still running, and that adaptation of this is what's needed; this is what we're providing under our department, and that program's free. I was really grateful that the district provided it. It was a setup that really came through for the school district's community. Because, I mean, you can probably attest to the fact that a lot of the different sites and schools under the whole school district umbrella, A lot of these families rely on afterschool. It really is an asset for child supervision in this particular community. And I'm grateful that the district is able to have these resources for our families, because people need them."

Discussion

A myriad of inferences can be made about ways that the data in this study answered the research question: *What are the ways in which BSD afterschool achieves/expands on traditional programs and achieves equitable, safe, and intuitive environments?*

Licensing And Professional Development

On topics deriving from the theme, "Quality Assurance and Professional Development through Program Licensure," it can be inferred that quality assurance licensure sets accountability standards that prompt afterschool programs to meet quality standards that in turn can guarantee expanded funding and resources to enrich its students and subsequent greater community.

Program licensure can be conceptualized as BSD afterschool's essential foundation because it sets the functional regulations and guidelines for the program in a variety of ways. Regarding interpretations of this theme from the qualitative interview data, top codes derived from this theme included the following keywords that were used in all participant interviews; "licensing" "professional development" "STARS" "YPQA" "staff training" "subsidies" and "site director roles". In total there were 115 aggregate coding references made in relation to data encompassing the licensing theme and related professional development and quality assurance tools that are implemented for BSD's afterschool programs. Licensing's total quantity of

aggregate coding references ranked fourth out of the five themes of organized data. This could be because each participant noted that while they are a site director and implement licensing policy and subsequent protocol, these regulations are developed and handed down from upper school administration and Vermont Department for Children and Families (DCF). Despite that each participant reported having limited knowledge on the subject of licensing origins, they could speak to the significance of its implications on the quality of afterschool programming.

Overall, findings suggest that licensing, quality assurance, and meeting national accreditation standards for quality programming through STARS all impact the quality of programming. In addition, these elements also impact the level of professional development in staff that fosters a safe, intuitive environment for students allowing them to learn, engage and thrive. Meeting and exceeding standards set by STARS additionally nets BSD afterschool additional subsidies and funding that can be targeted towards supporting students and families through providing materials for activities, meals for students at afterschool, and tuition remission for families who rely on afterschool for child care. In this way, licensing sets the standard and establishes the foundation of afterschool that in turn reaps all additional positives and benefits covered in this study's additional themes answering the research question.

Education Piece

Several implications can be made relating to educational support, academic achievement and the collaborative efforts of school day and afterschool faculty.

Findings related to collaboration between school day and afterschool faculty, highlighted one major component pertaining to the importance of afterschool being integrated into the school system. When afterschool has more visibility and is prioritized by its school districts, administration, and school day faculty, more collective efforts towards student wraparound support regarding academics and wellbeing can be achieved. Participant responses illuminated that afterschool provides a lens and insights to other school supports, collaboration with school faculty and DCF caseworkers.

Similarly, when afterschool programming is designed to match student interests, this may lead to improved student behaviors and attendance rates (Strongnation, 2019). For example, juvenile crime rates in Burlington decreased due to afterschool providing a safe and constructive environment for students.

In addition, participant responses noted that afterschool's high quality programming and opportunities for learning hold potential to close achievement gaps for students who may not have access to learning opportunities outside of the school day. With academic initiatives like one participant's Reading Buddies program, there is potential for students to receive additional academic support and encouragement in a learning environment resulting in improvements in student performance in academics.

Overall, the mission of the expanded learning opportunity concept that afterschool exists under provides intentions and goals that align with and thoroughly answer the research question.

Social-Emotional Learning

Findings relating to social and emotional learning implemented into BSD's afterschool programs reflect that the efforts of upholding and maintaining social and emotional learning as priorities and guidelines for engagement and behavior management accordingly solidifies afterschool as a safe space for students where they can feel seen, heard, and supported by their faculty and peers.

Social emotional learning provides students the opportunity to learn skills to regulate their behavior and interactions with peers. Implementation of behavior models like restorative practices and mindfulness with young children yields better regulation and social emotional skills for children who are already at a disadvantage for behavioral challenges due to trauma or challenges at home. This in turn aligns with the previous literature (ie Pierce, 2010), which found that positive, trusting relationships posited by afterschool faculty hold significant benefits for children's social and emotional development.

Further, the findings related to behavior management suggest that BSD afterschool staff take an intentional, trauma/resilience-informed approach when considering the needs and circumstances of every student in afterschool. Staff consider the causal roots and external factors presented in a student's life in order to understand the actions behind student behaviors. Use of restorative practices aims to teach students empathy and self-regulation skills that are critical for students in the Burlington Vermont area who may be experiencing adverse effects stemming from trauma, as participants claimed was present

These concepts in turn hold significant implications as restorative practices could yield the same positive results if applied in other school districts and child care programs. In general these findings can contribute to the expansion of research and dialogue on the efficacy of restorative practices as an approach towards social emotional learning, behavior management, and skill building towards emotional regulation for students in need of these supports.

Social Justice Components

In tandem with findings regarding the social emotional learning pieces that encompass the findings of this study, participant responses relating to social justice established that afterschool has the potential to act as an effective hub for advocacy for students' wellbeing and ability to thrive. Findings support that afterschool creates an environment wherein students have a safe space where they can feel seen and heard, be provided safety, connection with trusted

adults, a meal, and activities that are tailored to their interests and are provided by staff who have been given professional development training to be able to bond and communicate with students.

Restorative practices implemented in BSD afterschool have the capacity to function as an equity tool, and in this way the prioritization of RP and social emotional skill building helps students hold conversations about social justice, as well as engage in social justice in a way that allows students to exercise empathy and understanding for one another. This application of RP invokes social justice in the way that it also allows students to take an active approach in learning how to see the world and experiences from a point of view outside of their own, which is a fundamental piece of engaging in social justice on an individual level for students, and on a mezzo level as the school district implements these priorities and practices.

From this area of the study's findings it can be inferred that as a system, afterschool's structure prioritizes the advocacy of students' needs and rights as it serves as an essential point of contact and knowledge that can report and refer students to needed supports such as school day faculty, school counselors, and Vermont DCF when necessary for a student's wellbeing. Frequent participant responses relating to families spoke to afterschool possessing a significant level of consistent connection and communication with families that school day faculty don't often hold. In general, it can be surmised that BSD afterschool demonstrates a versatility to bridge oversight communication on a student between school day faculty and families and work with these contacts towards united goals in the best interest of students. Overall, these findings not only inform, but also provide visibility and recognition towards the notion that afterschool engages in an exceptional degree of intentional work to support and provide for its students and families.

COVID-19

Findings from this area of the study can inform that while the COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges for schools and communities, it has also shown the resilience of the BSD and larger community through the ways that faculty have adapted to improve the afterschool program into a space to help students thrive and grow. Adjustments made to the program opened up new opportunities for academic support and social connection for students. The creation of the Essential Childcare Program to support students and families with essential workers during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic and closure of schools speaks to the dedication that the Burlington School District holds to its students, families, and overarching community. The planning, decisions, and experiences participants shared regarding adaptations made to the afterschool program have the potential to serve as key catalysts that can be adapted by other afterschool and childcare programs in the event of potential future natural events impacting the education sector.

Conclusion

In summation, this study and its subsequent findings hold crucial implications for why increased development and focus on enriching afterschool programs hold significant benefits and potential for students socially, emotionally, and academically. Burlington School District's afterschool program fosters safe spaces, centers for learning and engagement, and provides supervision and security for students by dedicated and vigilant faculty.

Readdressing the research question of this study: "What are the ways in which BSD afterschool achieves/expands on traditional programs and achieves equitable, safe, and intuitive environments?" It can be seen that Burlington School District's Afterschool cares for and prioritizes the best interests and wellbeing of the district's students and families through delivering programming of the highest standard under state accreditations and licensing regulations. This high-caliber programming is achieved through implementation of key professional development training for staff, as well as through the mission and objectives of the BSD's overarching Expanded Learning Opportunity program. BSD also expands upon and exceeds standards of traditional afterschool programs with its diligent application of restorative practices as a model to manage behavior management of students, maintain social equity and fairness, and teach students vital social and emotional regulation skills. BSD afterschool maintains equity through restorative practices in the way that this model of facilitating conversation can open dialogues for students and families about empathy and acknowledging difference of experience. RP has guided BSD away from resorting to predominant discipline against students of color, which is a common occurrence across school systems nationwide. Through delivering students extracurricular activities and meal subsidies, BSD afterschool becomes an inherently safe space for students who may experience a variety of challenges or traumas. Overall the results of this study infer that Burlington School District's afterschool program serves as an exemplar model of the potential that afterschool programs hold to nurture and support students, close in on academic achievement gaps, and prioritize equity and diversity. While this study contained a small sample that cannot be generalizable to larger populations, the results could potentially inform research leading to greater protections for students, improved regulations and accreditation standards for child care organizations, wider range of available subsidies, and increased funding for afterschool programs to expand the resources that enrich and support students.

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